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Woody Guthrie's "Tom Joad": reinventing the American folk ballad

Andy Arleo, Centre de Recherches sur les Identités Nationales et l'Interculturalité, EA1162, Université de Nantes & CPER 10, Pays de la Loire, Axe 1, Atelier 1, Action "Traditions lyriques savantes et populaires"
Andrew.Arleo@univ-nantes.fr

1. Introduction

Several years ago one of my students lent me Rage Against the Machine's *Renegades* CD, released in 2000, on which there is a version of Bruce Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad." After listening to the record I had a talk with the student, who was surprised to discover Tom Joad's roots in literature, film and song. Springsteen's original 1995 recording echoes Woody Guthrie's ballad "Tom Joad," recorded in 1940, which had been directly inspired by John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and the successful John Ford film adaptation, released in 1940. Like many contemporary singer-songwriters, Springsteen has been strongly influenced by Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie's most famous spiritual and artistic descendant, and the author of many outstanding ballads.[1] Our conversation led me to think about the continuity of the folk ballad form over the centuries as well as the American variations on perennial themes such as the Robin Hood legend. The story told here begins with the European literary and folk ballads that developed in the late medieval period, takes us through the age of Romantic nationalism marked by a fascination for the folk, and then crosses the Atlantic and the continent to Okemah, Oklahoma, the birthplace of Woody Guthrie. After heading West with Woody and other "Okie" dust bowl refugees to the "promised land" of California in the 1930's, we go back east to the bohemian leftwing community of New York City, where Woody penned "Tom Joad" in one night before recording for Victor records on April 26, 1940. The main focus of this article will be on the Guthrie ballad, with passing references to the Steinbeck novel and the John Ford film. Finally, we will briefly look at Tom Joad's legacy as reflected in the Springsteen song.

[1] Including "The Ballad of Hollis Brown" and "Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" among many others. Guthrie's influence on Dylan has been documented extensively, most recently in Bob Dylan, *Chronicles*, vol. 1,New York, Simon & Schuster, 2004, where he writes that the first time he hear Woody "it was like a million megaton bomb had dropped" (p. 229). Martin Scorsese's outstanding 2005 documentary *Bob Dylan: No Direction Home* provides an indepth portrait of the early Dylan.

In addition to painting a portrait of an American folk ballad, this research aims to shed light on several more general issues. "Tom Joad" provides a fascinating case study on the migration and transformations of a particular poetic form, the ballad, notably within the historical and social context of Depression-era America. It also exemplifies the subtle interplay between oral and written traditions along the folk—popular—highbrow cultural continuum. The tale of the Joad family raises questions regarding shifting national, regional, social, ethnic and linguistic identities as well. The song also illustrates intertextuality within and among three different semiotic systems (music, language and film) and lends itself to a comparative study of narration in these media. Finally, we may view "Tom Joad" as a national folk/literary hero contributing to the forging of an American mythology.

2. The ballad as a narrative vessel

Like folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand, I will simply define the folk ballad as a narrative folk song.[2] Such a broad definition is necessary to avoid excluding songs that are generally considered as ballads. I will therefore not restrict folk ballads to anonymous songs and will consider that songwriters like Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen have created new ballads that may indeed become "folk songs," i.e., pieces sung by non-professionals who eventually forget who wrote the songs in the first place and subsequently pass them on from one person to another through oral transmission in small groups. Indeed, folkloristic research has shown that the folk song corpus includes many items bearing the *anon*. label that were actually composed by individual songwriters in the past.

Using the *container/conduit metaphor* that underlies the etymology of the word *form*, we may consider the ballad as a *narrative vessel* that, in this case, has transported its verbal and musical cargo from the Old World to the New.[3] Over the centuries the vessel itself has undergone a number of transformations but still remains recognizable. While narrative folk songs are undoubtedly universal, the roots of the American folk ballad are definitely European. The term *ballad* appears to be derived from Old Provençal *ballada*, meaning a piece sung for dancing, from *ballar*, "to dance" plus the suffix *–ada*. In the 14th century, with poets like Guillaume de Machaut, the French *ballade* became a fixed poetic form, made up of

[2] Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: an Introduction*, 2nd ed., New York, W. W. Norton, 1978, p. 178. Further information on the American folk ballad may be found in a recent collection of essays edited by Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus, *The Rose and the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad,* New York, W.W. Norton, 2005.

[3] See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 10-11.

three stanzas comprising seven to ten lines each. With François Villon the *ballade* became, like a sonnet, a fixed poetic form with even more precise formal constraints: three eight-line stanzas plus a four-line *envoi* (cf. "Ballade des dames du temps jadis"). Under the influence of La Pléiade, which favored the sonnet, the French literary tradition abandoned the *ballade* as a dominant literary form around the end of the sixteenth century, but the ballad tradition survived as a folk form without the same formal constraints. Ballads, in the sense of *narrative folk songs*, spread across Europe in the late Middle Ages.

The collection and study of English-language ballads got off the ground in 1765 when Bishop Thomas Percy published his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. Percy, a priest in the Church of England, claims to have "found a manuscript recording ancient ballads at the home of Humphrey Pitt in Staffordshire. 'I saw it lying dirty on the floor…being used by the Maids to light the fires,' he explained in 1769[…]"[4] This apocryphal "saved from the fire" tale illustrates the (sometimes justified) belief of generations of collectors who have claimed to rescue traditional materials from oblivion. The study of folk ballads blossomed within the context of 19th-century European romantic nationalism. In 1846 the British writer William Thoms coined the compound *folklore*, which replaced an older term, *popular antiquities*. Folklore became closely linked to the nation-state. According to Abrahams, the antiquarians, the ancestors of the folklorists, "argued that each domain that makes a claim for the status of nation-state has its own body of tradition that records and represents the history and accrued wisdom of 'the people.'"[5] Theorists like Johann Herder, who developed the notion of *Volksgeist* or national character, and the Grimms associated folklore with language, land and the idea of nation.

The most influential collection of English-language ballads was compiled by the Harvard philologist Francis James Child, in his monumental five-volume work *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, published between 1882 and 1898. The 305 canonical Child ballads date from or nearly from the Middle Ages. The first verse of the well-known ballad "The House Carpenter" (Child n° 243), shown below, illustrates the traditional ballad form. The syllables in boldface are synchronized with the main beat and the asterisks represent beats without corresponding syllable onsets, i.e., rests or held notes.

[4] Roger D. Abrahams, Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics, *Journal of American Folklore* 106 (419), 1993, p. 11.
[5] Ibid., p.9.

"Well **met**, well **met**," said an **old** true **love**,
"Well **met**, well **met**," said **he**; *
"I've **just** re**turned** from a **far** foreign **land**,
And it's **all** for the **love** of **thee**. *

The underlying sixteen-beat metrical scheme may be represented as a quatrain with an *abcb* rhyming scheme, as shown in (i), or as a rhyming couplet, shown in (ii):

(i)

X	X	X	X	a
X	X	X	*	b
X	X	X	X	c
X	X	X	*	b

(ii)

X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	a
X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	a

Printed broadside ballads "first appeared in sixteenth-century England and on the Continent shortly after the earliest European landings in the New World."[6] Sold cheaply on the streets, they often dealt with topical issues, in a sensationalist manner that is somewhat reminiscent of present-day tabloids.[7] Compared to their ancestors from the British Isles, American ballads show a number of New World features, such as loss of the supernatural and subject matter reflecting the development of the American nation. In 1950 the American scholar Malcolm Laws drew up a classification of American ballads that included the following categories: War Ballads, Ballads of Cowboys and Pioneers, Ballads of Lumberjacks, Ballads of Sailors and the Sea, Ballads about Criminals and Outlaws, Murder Ballads, Ballads of Tragedies and Disasters, Ballads on Various Topics, Ballads of the Negro.[8]

3. Woody Guthrie

> Who is he? He's a hustling ex-sign painter from Oklahoma, an antimaterialist who grew up in the Depression and Dust Bowl days—migrated West, had a tragic childhood, a lot of fire in his life—figuratively and literally. He's a singing cowboy, but he's more than a singing cowboy. Woody's got a fierce poetic soul—the poet of hard crust sod and gumbo mud. Guthrie divides the world between those who work and those who don't and is interested in the liberation of the human race and wants to create a world worth living in.[9]

[6] Wilentz and Marcus, op. cit., p. 1.
[7] Brunvand, op. cit., p. 186.
[8] Malcolm Laws, *Native American Balladry*, American Folklore Society, 1950, revised in 1964, cited by Brunvand, op. cit., p. 192, 201.
[9] Dylan, op. cit., p. 245.

Woodrow "Woody" Guthrie was one of the most prolific American songwriters of the twentieth century and, as can be seen in the above quotation, had tremendous influence on the songwriters of the 1960's folk revival. His songs continue to resonate in the work of younger artists, such as Tracy Chapman. Guthrie's tragic life has been recounted numerous times, notably in his own semi-autobiographical 1943 novel *Bound for Glory*, adapted for the screen in 1976 by director Hal Ashby, and in Joe Klein's outstanding biography.[10]

Born in Okemah, Oklahoma on July 14, 1912, Woody's childhood was marked by a series of tragic events including the death of his sister Clara, his father's bankruptcy and his mother's institutionalization. Like many young men of the Depression era, Woody hit the road in the early 1930's while still a teenager. Married to Mary Jennings in 1933, with whom he would have three children, he earned a living as a sign painter and performer, entertaining crowds by singing and playing the guitar, harmonica and spoons. In 1935, following the Great Dust Storm of April 14, Woody began a lot of "Hard Travelin'" (the title of one of his many road songs), eventually heading west to California with other "dust bowl refugees." With his cousin Jack Guthrie, he worked for radio KFVD in Los Angeles, appearing on "The Oklahoma and Woody Show," which made its debut on July 19, 1937. Woody began writing more political songs, such as "The Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd," turning the famous outlaw into a Robin Hood figure, thereby attracting the attention of the Communist Party and other left-wing groups making up the Popular Front. During this period Woody entertained fellow Okies in the migrant camps of California that are depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In 1940 Woody headed east to New York City, joining a group of New York leftist artists and intellectuals. On March 3 of that year he performed in a "Grapes of Wrath Evening" organized by actor Will Geer for the benefit of the "John Steinbeck Committee for Agricultural Workers," which featured other American ballad singers, including Alan and Bess Lomax, Aunt Molly Jackson and the African American folk-blues singer Leadbelly. Later that year he would record *The Dust Bowl Ballads* (see below). In the early 1940's Guthrie joined the Almanac Singers, an influential leftist folk group that included Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Lampell and John Peter Hawes, and that formed a crucial link to the post-war folk revival movement. Hospitalized for Huntington's Chorea in 1954, Woody succumbed to this hereditary degenerative disease thirteen years later on October 3, 1967. His son Arlo, one of four children he had with Marjorie Mazia, emerged in the 1960's as a

[10] Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: a Life,* New York, Delta, 1980.

successful songwriter after recording the long talking blues "Alice's Restaurant," which was adapted for the screen in 1969 by Arthur Penn.

Guthrie became the powerful symbol of the downtrodden Okies whose plight is portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck himself declared that Woody Guthrie "sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people."[11] For his fellow Almanac Singers, Guthrie "embodied the prototype of the worker-poet to which the others aspired."[12] However, as Robert Cantwell has pointed out, Woody was not "neither an unlettered dust-bowl refugee nor a pure-blood neolithic Pict, as Lomax fancifully identified him," but "the son of genteel literate parents and a father who had made a small career in local business and politics […]"[13] The tragic circumstances of his life as well as his artistry and bohemian inclinations turned Guthrie into a "working class hero" and a national folk poet. His "ramblin'" lifestyle recalls that of the European balladeers, such as François Villon, and the travelling minstrels of the past. His capacity to reinvent himself and to cross social, ethnic and geographical barriers was a direct inspiration for the young Dylan, who visited his mentor in his New Jersey hospital in the early 1960's, and other figures of the folk revival.

4. Woody Guthrie's "Tom Joad"

The Making of "Tom Joad"

One of the key players involved in the writing and recording of "Tom Joad" was folklorist Alan Lomax, who would have a major role in the burgeoning twentieth-century American folk music movement. Lomax had begun his initial field work at age seventeen by accompanying his father John Lomax on a trip to the Deep South in the summer of 1933 to record work songs sung by black inmates.[14] In March 1940, as assistant director of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, he invited Woody to Washington to record.[15] Lomax's next step in promoting Guthrie's career was to persuade Victor Records to produce a two-album twelve-record set of Woody's dust bowl ballads, in part to counter its main rival Columbia, which was releasing an album by folksinger Burl Ives. Victor also hoped to cash in on the popularity of John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which had been

[11] Klein, op. cit., p. 166.
[12] Reuss, Richard A. with JoAnne C. Reuss. *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics 1927-1957*, Lanham, Maryland, The Scarecrow Press, 2000, p. 161.
[13] Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: the folk revival*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 133.
[14] Klein, op. cit, p. 147.
[15] These recordings would only reach the public 25 years later (Klein, op. cit., p. 160).

released earlier that year. According to the account given by Guthrie's biographer Joe Klein, Pete Seeger took Woody over to the apartment of a friend who owned a typewriter. Woody worked through the night with the aid of a half gallon of wine while Seeger dozed off, waking up the next day to find "the bottle empty, Guthrie asleep on the floor, and a seventeen-verse ballad called 'Tom Joad' sitting in the typewriter."[16] Woody had set the lyrics to the tune of a famous outlaw ballad "John Hardy," which he had been listening to over and over at Lomax's house. The "John Hardy" or "John Harty" ballad was, according to Alan Lomax, of white mountain origin, and recounted the story of "a West Virginia Negro tunnel-worker who had killed a man in a gambling dispute, and was hanged on 19 January 1894."[17] The name of the protagonist and the five-line stanza recall the famous African-American folk ballad "John Henry." The first verse of the version given by Lomax is shown below:

> John Harty was a desperate little man,
> Carried a gun ev'ry day,
> Killed a man in the West Virginia land,
> Ought-a seen little Johnny get away,
> Ought-a seen little Johnny get away.

Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads*, which also include other classic American songs, such as "Pretty Boy Floyd," "Do Re Mi," and "I Ain't Got No Home," were subsequently recorded on April 26 and May 3, 1940 and issued by Victor that July. It was to become his most successful album.

The Poetics of "Tom Joad"

Modeled after "John Hardy", "Tom Joad" has seventeen verses (see Appendix 1), each of which has an *abcBB* rhyme scheme (where capital letters denote repeated lines), as can be seen in the first verse:

Tom Joad got out of the old McAlester Pen,	a
There he got his parole.	b
After four long years on a man killing charge,	a
Tom Joad come a walking down the road, poor boy,	B
Tom Joad come a walking down the road.	B

As is often the case in folk songs, Guthrie's rhyme schemes use assonance (*parole*/*road*) and approximate rhymes (*home*/*gone*) as well as true rhymes (*ride*/*homicide*). Compared to the classic ballad format, shown in "The House Carpenter" above, the *abcBB* pattern might be called an extended ballad form. Each line has four main beats, designated as half-notes in the

[16] Klein, op. cit. 164.
[17] Alan Lomax, *The Penguin Book of American Folk Songs*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1964, p. 119.

published music. As can be seen as can be seen in the first line of the second verse, the syllables aligned with these beats (*Joad*, *met*, *truck*, *man*) would normally be stressed in spoken English (the symbol X represents the half-note beat):

	X		X		X	X
Tom	Joad	he	met	a	truck driving	man,

Lines 1 and 3 of each verse have four syllables aligned with the main beat, whereas lines 2, 4 and 5 have three syllables aligned with the main beat. This can be illustrated by the second line of the second verse (the asterisk represents a beat that is not aligned with a syllable onset):

X		X		X	X
There	he	caught	him a	ride,	*

With the exception of the repeated line, the metrical pattern is therefore very similar to that of "The House Carpenter":

X	X	X	X	a
X	X	X	*	b
X	X	X	X	c
X	X	X	*	B
X	X	X	*	B

It should be noticed that in Guthrie often inserts an interjection between the repeated lines (e.g., "Poor boy"). There are also occasional minor variations in the repeated line.

The music and performance of "Tom Joad"

The "John Hardy" tune is based on two simple melodic phrases, the first corresponding to lines 1, 2 and 3, and the second to the repeated lines 4 and 5. The twenty-bar structure is an extension of the standard sixteen-bar pattern that is very common in folk, popular and classical music. Woody accompanies himself on the guitar and the harmonica in a straightforward unpolished manner that reflects the esthetics of "natural" spontaneous folk simplicity as opposed to the slicker and smoother commercial music associated with Tin Pan Alley. The tempo is lively and upbeat, and the non-programmatic music does not attempt to imitate the pathos of certain verses through the use of a minor key or any special effects. The melody is outlined on the bass strings of the guitar in the so-called "Carter style," made famous by Maybelle Carter, of the Carter Family, an influential country band from Virginia, first recorded in 1927. The harmonica playing is rough, aiming at rhythmic effectiveness and expression rather than a "clean" execution that might be expected in other idioms such as

contemporary jazz, bluegrass, country or pop music. Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, among others, would pick up on this "folk" esthetic, as a way of distancing themselves from the mainstream commercial values of the music industry. Guthrie usually takes care to articulate each word and his voice is right up front, cutting through the mix. Dylan compared Woody's voice to a "stiletto" and was impressed by his diction: "He had a perfected style of singing that it seemed like no one else had ever thought about. He would throw in the sound of the last letter of a word whenever he felt like it and it would come like a punch."[18]

The language of "Tom Joad"

Language, as a marker of regional and social identity, is at the heart of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In one linguistically revealing scene Pa Joad meets the Wilson's, migrants from Kansas, and observes tactfully:

> "I knowed you wasn't Oklahomy folks. You talk queer, kinda—that ain't no blame, you understan'."
> "Ever'body says words different," said Ivy. "Arkansas folks says 'em different, and Oklahomy folk says 'em different. And we seen a lady from Massachusetts, an' she said 'em differentest of all. Couldn' hardly make out what she was sayin'."[19]

As can be seen in this extract, Steinbeck had a keen ear for the vernacular American English of the time. Non-standard (NS) speech patterns are used throughout the novel to characterize the Joads' Okie identity, including multiple negation ("We ain't had hardly no trouble…"), the assimilations and elisions that characterize informal spoken American English (*somepin* for Standard English "something"; *fambly*, "family"), regional vocalic variation (*sence*, "since"; *tared*, "tired"; *git*, "get"), NS past participles (*wore*, "worn") and so on. Steinbeck also allows his characters to engage in sociolinguistic commentary. For instance, the ambiguity of the word *Okie*, which has become an ethnic slur, is explicated for Tom Joad, thus contributing to his growing social awareness:

> Tom said, "Okie? What's that?"
> "Well, Okie use'ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you're scum. Don't mean nothing itself, it's the way they say it. But I can't tell you nothin'. You got to go there.[20]

In the ballad "Tom Joad" Woody Guthrie also uses NS English, signalling to the listener that this is a "real" Okie talking about other Okies: "he found his family they *was* gone" (v. 3), "Tom *run* back" (v. 15), "wherever people *ain't* free" (v. 17). Guthrie's folksy Southwestern

[18] Dylan, op. cit., p. 244.
[19] John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, New York, Penguin, 1992, p. 184.
[20] Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 280.

accent ("we got to *git* away", v. 5), also contributes to the perceived "authenticity" of the performance. The ballad is marked by American vocabulary and cultural concepts: "McAlester's pen" (i.e., penitentiary), "he got his parole," "tractored out by the cats" (i.e., Caterpillar tractors) and so on. The deputy sheriff and the preacher are stock characters in the American frontier mythology. There are also New World echoes of biblical and religious imagery: "the promised land" (v. 8), "bright green valley" (v. 8) and "one big soul" (v. 16). Guthrie's lyrics could be a primer for plain English. He uses almost exclusively basic monosyllabic verbs, often with Anglo Saxon roots (e.g., *get*, *come*, *meet*, *find*). The dynamic transitive verbs of movement and action contribute to the cinematographic quality of the lyrics, e.g., "Preacher Casey dropped him in his track" (v. 10) and "Tom Joad he grabbed that deputy's club" (v. 14).[21]

The narration of "Tom Joad"

Woody's seventeen-verse ballad runs nearly seven minutes (6:55), compared to the film, which lasts just over two hours (2:04), and to the six hundred-page book, whose reception time might range roughly from ten to thirty hours depending on reading speed. A ballad therefore cannot hope to "compete" with a novel (or a film) in terms of character development, cultural allusions, historical background, thematic sophistication, elaborate plotting, or argumentation. Paradoxically, ballads tend to be both concise and redundant. The economy of "Tom Joad" is obvious, as can easily be shown by comparing a given verse with a scene in the novel or the film. The redundancy of Guthrie's ballad is tied to the nature of song and oral poetry in general. The listener hears the same "John Hardy" tune for each of the seventeen verses and during the instrumental breaks; furthermore, the tune itself is built from repeated melodic phrases. This melodic repetition is paralleled by verbal repetition, notably through the use of the repeated line in each verse, which does not convey any new information in a narrow sense, but perhaps signals that this information is important. Metrical adjustment also requires extra syllables that do little for the meaning: "Tom Joad *he* met a truck driving man" (v. 2). In oral traditions repetition has a basic mnemonic function in addition to any putative esthetic purposes. Reiterated rhythms and melodies, recurrent sound patterns, rhyme schemes, grammatical parallelism and other devices contribute crucially to the partial or total memorization of the song.[22] By wedding lyrics to an appealing, easily

[21] Thanks to my colleague Paul Lees for calling my attention to Woody's verbal dynamism.

[22] This is demonstrated in detail by cognitive psychologist David Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: the Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

retained or well-known tune, the songwriter "hooks" us; through repeated listening, the song and its story may thus become part of our lives. This is no doubt one of the great strengths of the ballad, a memorable hybrid narrative vessel packed with emotion. Returning to "Tom Joad," let us see how Guthrie tells his story through a series of carefully chosen "shots."

In typical ballad style, Woody uses both descriptive third person narration (e.g., v. 1, 3, 7) and direct speech (especially v. 15 and 16), often blending both techniques within the same verse (e.g., v. 2, 4, 5). The first three verses introduce us to two of the main characters, Tom Joad and Preacher Casey. We learn that Tom has been released from jail on parole "after four long years," apparently for killing a man. By using the word "charge," Guthrie raises the possibility that perhaps Tom was not totally responsible for a homicide. Was he framed? Did he kill in self-defense? Verse 4 simply tells us that the "cats" have tractored out the Joad family, but unlike the novel and the film, does not provide any rationale or suggest, as Steinbeck does, that the bankers back east, symbolizing the capitalist system, might be responsible for this sad state of affairs that sets the working folks against each other. In verse 5, where Ma Joad notes in a matter-of-fact tone that the family has got to "git away," Grandpa Joad breaks down, crying out "I'm staying with the farm till I die / Yes, I'm staying with the farm till I die." The repeated line is used here (and elsewhere) with great effect, heightened by the simple affirmative "Yes" that opens the last line.

Verse 7 provides a good example of the narrative shortcuts that ballads inevitably take:

> They fed him short ribs and coffee and soothing syrup,
> And Grandpa Joad did die.

Guthrie's somewhat brutal editing may create a humorous effect for the present-day listener, as if Grandpa died of too many ribs and too much coffee and syrup. Although Woody no doubt had a keen and even zany sense of humor, especially in his children's songs, it is doubtful that there is any intentional comical effect here.

With its biblical and pastoral imagery verse 8 is both thematically important and visually striking:

> They stood on a mountain and they looked to the West,
> And it looked like the promised land,
> That bright green valley with a river running through,
> There was work for every single hand, they thought,

> There was work for every single hand.

Taking advantage of the panoramic scene, John Ford has the Joad family rushing over to the side of the road to gaze upon the promised land of California and exclaiming how "purty and green" it is. The gap between the family's idealistic expectations and real life for migrants in California is a major theme in the novel as well. Early on in the story, Ma Joad paints a bright picture of their new life:

> But I like to think how nice it's gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold. An' fruit ever'place, an' people just bein' in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees.[23]

In his famous cautionary Dust Bowl ballad, "Do Re Mi," Woody comments ironically:

> California is a Garden of Eden,
> It's a paradise to live in or to see,
> But believe it or not
> You won't find it so hot
> If you ain't got that Do Re Mi.

Verse 9 captures another key scene both in the novel and in the film:

> The Joads rolled away to the Jungle Camp,
> There they cooked a stew.
> And the hungry little kids of the Jungle Camp,
> Said: "We'd like to have some too."
> Said: "We'd like to have some too."

In a few words, Woody depicts "the hungry little kids" without a hint of pathos in his delivery or in the music. The simple repetition of the last line does however stir up emotion by recreating the echo of the children's voices. This structural device, inherited from the "John Hardy" ballad, is once again used most effectively to enhance the meaning of the lyrics: the repetition of the conclusive and often most important line gives the listener time to absorb the message and feel the full impact of the mental image. Guthrie cannot of course probe the psychological development of the characters in depth. In the novel Tom chases the kids away as there is not enough food to go around, whereas Ma decides she cannot let the children go hungry and manages to feed them some leftover stew. Ma Joad, whose resilience is a major theme in the novel and film, is downplayed in the Guthrie ballad, which focuses on the male Robin Hood figure that Woody perhaps identified with. The scene suggests the gradual transformation of the Joad family, as they realize that the family is not an island, but must reach out to the other oppressed Okies to survive. In the film Henry Fonda's body language

[23] Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 124.

and facial expressions portray a troubled Tom Joad whose budding political awareness forms one of the major themes of Steinbeck's proletarian novel.

Preacher Casey, the other male protagonist presented in the ballad, is instrumental in converting Tom to an uplifting social and spiritual vision. Practising what he preaches, Casey puts his life on the line, and before dying he passes on the good word: if the "workin' folks" don't all get together they "ain't got a chance anymore" (v. 12). The preacher and a deputy are then promptly laid away in verses 13 and 14:

> Now the deputies come and Tom and Casey run
> To the bridge where the water run down.
> But the vigilante thugs hit Casey with a club,
> They laid Preacher Casey on the ground, poor Casey,
> They laid Preacher Casey on the ground.
>
> Tom Joad he grabbed that deputy's club,
> Hit him over the head.
> Tom Joad took flight in the dark rainy night,
> And a deputy and a preacher lying dead. Two men.
> A deputy and a preacher lying dead.

Two men. The two stark syllables evoke our ultimate equality in death, the great leveler. The Preacher, the formulaic "poor boy"of verse 11, has grown up to be a man, and will presumably go up to his heavenly reward. As a depression-era country song pointed out, "there will be no distinction there." Meanwhile, his earthly words and deeds lead to Tom's epiphany, spelled out in the last three verses, where Woody merges a pantheistic ("Ev'rybody might be just one big soul") and a social utopian vision. This not only echoes the novel, but also sums up Guthrie's own beliefs, which anticipated the spirituality of the 1960's counter-culture movement. Tom Joad is cast as an American Robin Hood, like the outlaw hero Pretty Boy Floyd, who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. In fact, Ma, always the realist, warns her son: "Tom, they'll drive you, an' cut you down like they done to young Floyd." In "Pretty Boy Floyd," another of the famous Dust Bowl ballads, after recounting how the outlaw brought Christmas dinner for the families on relief, Woody concludes:

> Now as through this world I ramble,
> I see lots of funny men,
> Some will rob you with a six-gun,
> And some with a fountain pen.
>
> But as through this life you travel,
> As through your life you roam,
> You won't never see an outlaw,
> Drive a family from their home.

This goes to the core of Tom Joad's predicament and questions our own moral judgement, should we care to ponder the ethical implications of the story. Under man's law, Tom is indeed an outlaw. Indeed, the "John Hardy" tune and lyrics, lingering intertextually in the background, remind the informed listener of this fact. But under a higher law, and in view of the harsh injustice of the depression era, are men like Tom Joad the real outlaws? Was the Preacher guilty?

> He wasn't doing nothin' against the law, Ma. I been thinkin' a hell of a lot, thinkin' about our people livin' like pigs, an' the good rich lan' layin' fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hunderd thousan' good farmers is starvin'. An' I been wonderin' if all our folks got together an' yelled[…][24]

In the novel and film Tom gradually works out the logical consequences of this line of thought, while Ma plays the role of a Socratic midwife helping her son deliver a greater truth:

> Tom laughed uneasily, "Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one—an' then—"
> "Then what, Tom?"
> "Then it don' matter. Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark, I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there.[25]

Woody picks up the grammatical parallelism of Steinbeck's prose, fitting it seamlessly into the ballad format:

> Ev'rybody might be just a one big soul
> Well it looks that-a-way to me.
> Everywhere that you look in the day or night
> That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma,
> That's where I'm a-gonna be.
>
> Wherever little children are hungry and cry,
> Wherever people ain't free,
> Wherever men are fightin' for their rights,
> That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma,
> That's where I'm a-gonna be.

Here ends Guthrie's story. In contrast, the final scenes of the novel and the film depict women as the symbols of life and the endurance of the Okies. Steinbeck has Rose of Sharon breastfeeding an elderly Okie dying of hunger. John Ford shows us a close-up of Pa and Ma Joad seated in the front seat of the truck, Ma explaining that "we'll go on forever, Pa, 'cause we're the people." In the last shot we see a long line of trucks carrying the Okie migrants into the promised land.

5. Bruce Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad"

[24] Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 571.
[25] Ibid., p. 572.

Springsteen's song, which will not be analyzed here in great detail, shows the continuity of the ballad as a tool of social protest and the relevance of the hero "Tom Joad," whose ghost is with us, at the eve of a new millennium, fighting injustice, as he promised Ma. The *fin de siècle* ballad also shows us how "The Boss" (Springsteen) has reshaped the traditional material. The song opens with Springsteen playing a series of arresting high-pitched notes on the harmonica over a minor chord finger-picked on an acoustic guitar. Although the rough expressive use of the harmonica recalls Guthrie and Dylan, the atmosphere differs significantly from Woody's "Tom Joad." Springsteen's vocal style, marked by the slurring together of syllables and the softening or deletion of consonants, contrasts with the clear "stiletto" diction of Guthrie that impressed young Bob Dylan. The melody of "The Ghost of Tom Joad" does not appear to recycle any traditional ballad tune, while the slow tempo and the minor key contribute to a darker more sinister feeling meant to illustrate the lyrics. This programmatic approach is enhanced as the rest of the band (pedal steel guitar, keyboard, bass and drums) comes in at the beginning of the second verse. In accordance with the Springsteen sound as well as the esthetic values of the American music industry of the late twentieth century, the arrangement and orchestration is more polished and less spontaneous than Woody's 1940 performance. With three eight-line verses, each followed by a four-line refrain, Springsteen's ballad is also much shorter than Guthrie's marathon seventeen-verse "Tom Joad." The rhyme schemes differ from the classic ballad pattern discussed above (e.g., "The House Carpenter"). The verse is made up of four rhyming couplets (*aabbccdd*) while the refrain uses an *abab* pattern. The lyrics blend imagery from the Steinbeck novel with references to contemporary America ("Welcome to the new world order"). The last two lines of the first verse appear to evoke the homeless who at the end of the century are still part of the landscape:

> Families sleepin' in their cars in the Southwest
> No home no job no peace no rest.

In the second verse of the ballad we rediscover the Preacher:

> Preacher lights up a butt and takes a drag
> Waitin' for when the last shall be first and the first shall be last
> In a cardboard box 'neath the underpass

The next line recycles the "promised land" theme:

> Got a one-way ticket to the promised land
> You got a hole in your belly and gun in your hand.

Like Woody, Springsteen has Tom making a vow to his mother in the last verse:

> Now Tom said "Mom, wherever there's a cop beatin' a guy
> Wherever a hungry newborn baby cries
> Wherever there's a fight 'gainst the blood and hatred in the air
> Look for me Mom I'll be there[…]

The song closes with the singer-narrator

> […] sitting down here in the campfire light
> With the ghost of old Tom Joad.

The implications are clear. Contemporary America still needs heroes like Tom Joad to fight for justice and balladeers like Springsteen to spread the word of their deeds.

In his low-key rendition of "The Ghost of Tom Joad" Bruce Springsteen sings with quiet conviction, his voice sinking at times to an intimate whisper that occasionally hinders comprehension. On the other hand, in the Rage Against the Machine version of the ballad, the leader singer spits out the lyrics. Their performance begins with an electric guitar programmatically evoking "the highway patrol choppers comin' up over the ridge." Throughout the song, which stretches out to nearly six minutes (5:38 compared to Springsteen's 4:26), the heavily amplified layers of distorted sound call out angrily for violent confrontation with "the new world order" (the band covers The Rolling Stones' "Street Fighting Man" on the same album). In spite of this massive wall of sound, the lyrics are quite clearly articulated, and even reinforced through the use of echo. At the end of the last verse the lead singer screams "You'll see me" in a loop as a searing guitar evokes police sirens in an apocalyptic vision of a future revolution.

Conclusion

Through the example of Woody Guthrie's "Tom Joad," this paper has shown how an Old World poetic form, the ballad, and the archetypal British Robin Hood legend, have been transformed on American soil. Using the "John Hardy" outlaw ballad as a narrative vessel and drawing his characters from *The Grapes of Wrath*, Guthrie linked "Tom Joad" to other legendary American outlaw heroes, such as "Pretty Boy Floyd." The poetic, musical, performance, linguistic and narrative features of Guthrie's ballad provide markers of national, regional and social identity for the experienced culturally aware listener. Although the European-rooted ballad form remains recognizable, it is above all perceived as an American song performed by an "Okie" in a folk-country style that developed in the South in the first half of the twentieth century before spreading to the young urban well-educated middle class

during the Folk Revival of the Sixties. At the end of the century, displaying continuity with Woody Guthrie via the influence of Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen reshapes the genre and the story for his own stylistic purposes in "The Ghost of Tom Joad." Finally, Rage Against the Machine's new millenium version deconstructs Springsteen's folk-inspired protest song, turning it into a distorted apocalyptic urban nightmare, while passing on Steinbeck's tale in ballad form to a new generation. Although the epic of the Joad family arose out of the social and political context of the depression, the plight of migrant workers continues to haunt us today, not only in California, but also in other parts of the world, as we witness, for example, African Joads attempting to cross the border to get to the European promised land. While Tom Joad is an American literary/folk hero, his story and that of his family are no doubt universally relevant. As for the folk ballad form, we may say, paraphrasing Bruce Springsteen, that like the highway it is still alive tonight.

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Appendix 1: Lyrics of Woody Guthrie's "Tom Joad"[26]

1. Tom Joad got out of the old McAlester pen,
   There he got his parole.
   After four long years on a man killing charge,
   Tom Joad come a-walking down the road, poor boy,
   Tom Joad come a-walking down the road.

2. Tom Joad he met a truck driving man,
   There he caught him a ride.
   He said: "I just got loose from McAlester's pen
   On a charge called homicide.
   A charge called homicide.

3. That truck rolled away in a cloud of dust,
   Tommy turned his face toward home.
   He met Preacher Casey and they had a little drink,
   But they found that his family they was gone,
   He found that his family they was gone.

4. He found his mother's old-fashioned shoe,
   Found his Daddy's hat,
   And he found little Muley and Muley said:
   "They've been tractored out by the cats,
   They've been tractored out by the cats."

5. Tom Joad walked down to the neighbors' farm,
   Found his family.
   They took Preacher Casey and loaded in a car
   And his mother said: "We got to git away."
   His mother said: "We got to git away."

6. Now the twelve of the Joads made a mighty heavy load,
   But Grandpa Joad did cry.
   He picked up a handful of land in his hand
   Said: "I'm stayin' with the farm till I die.
   Yes, I'm stayin' with the farm till I die."

7. They fed him short ribs and coffee and soothing syrup
   And Grandpa Joad did die.
   They buried Grandpa Joad by the side of the road,
   Grandma on the California side,
   They buried Grandma on the California side.

8. They stood on a mountain and they looked to the West,
   And it looked like the promised land,
   That bright green valley with a river running through,

[26] The text presented here is based on Woody's 1940 recorded performance on *Dust Bowl Ballads*. Punctuation and typographical conventions generally follow those of the version published in Pete Seeger, ed., *Woody Guthrie Folk Songs*, London, TRO Music Ltd., 1973, pp. 90-92.

There was work for every single hand, they thought,
There was work for every single hand.

9. The Joads rolled away to the Jungle Camp,
There they cooked a stew.
And the hungry little kids of the Jungle Camp,
Said: "We'd like to have some too."
Said: "We'd like to have some too."

10. Now a deputy sheriff fired loose at a man,
Shot a woman in the back.
Before he could take his aim again,
Preacher Casey dropped him in his track, poor boy,
Preacher Casey dropped him in his track.

11. They handcuffed Casey and they took him in jail,
And then he got away,
And he met Tom Joad on the old river bridge,
And these few words he did say, poor boy,
These few words he did say.

12. "I preached for the Lord a mighty long time,
Preached about the rich and the poor.
Us working folks is all get together
'Cause we ain't got a chance anymore.
We ain't got a chance anymore.

13. Now the deputies come and Tom and Casey run
To the bridge where the water run down.
But the vigilante thugs hit Casey with a club,
They laid Preacher Casey on the ground, poor Casey,
They laid Preacher Casey on the ground.

14. Tom Joad he grabbed that deputy's club,
Hit him over the head.
Tom Joad took flight in the dark rainy night,
And a deputy and a preacher lying dead. Two men.
A deputy and a preacher lying dead.

15. Tom run back where his mother was asleep.
He woke her up out of bed.
And he kissed goodbye to the mother that he loved.
Said what Preacher Casey said, Tom Joad,
He said what Preacher Casey said.

16. "Ev'rybody might be just a one big soul
Well it looks that-a-way to me.
Everywhere that you look in the day or night
That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma,
That's where I'm a-gonna be.

17. Wherever little children are hungry and cry,
Wherever people ain't free,
Wherever men are fightin' for their rights,
That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma,
That's where I'm a-gonna be.